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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session

Draft report

Addendum

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II. Control and limitation of documentation

D. Translation-related matters

Introduction and overview

1. The General Assembly, in section B of resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997, expressed a number of concerns with regard to translation-related matters and requested the Secretary-General to take certain steps to meet those concerns.

2. Moreover, the Assembly, in paragraphs 13 to 15 of section III of resolution 52/220 of 22 December 1997, noted with concern the abolition of 30 posts of translator and interpreter and the practices with respect to self-revision, attaining proportions of 80 per cent during periods of peak workload, whereas the specified standard was 45 per cent. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to keep those two issues under review, in the light of its resolution 50/11 of 2 November 1995, and to report to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session, through the Committee on Conferences, on their impact on the quality of conference services provided.

3. At its 408th and 409th meetings, on 1 and 2 September 1997, the Committee on Conferences considered two reports on the foregoing matters, respectively, a note by the Secretariat (AC.172/1998/CRP.6) and a report of the Secretary-General (A/53/221).

Discussion

4. Comments were made and clarifications were sought by delegations on the various matters covered in the two reports before the Committee.

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5. Concerning the suspension of some publications in all official languages, the view was expressed that all the official languages should be treated equally. Clarification was provided by the Secretariat on the practice whereby author departments may take the languages of the target audience into account when determining in which languages publications should be issued. It was noted that publications policy and its implementation were the responsibility of a number of entities besides conference services. Attention was also drawn to the relevant recommendations of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on publications (A/51/946).

6. On the issue of meeting records, the representative of the Secretariat provided clarification on the measures that had been taken to expedite the processing of summary records, both in-house and contractually, with a view to ensuring their issuance within four months after the end of a session. It was further explained that the pilot project involving greater reliance on sound recordings would be assessed by the end of the year in the light of the feedback received from delegations concerned.

7. On the issues of timeliness and quality of translation, concern was expressed over continued high rates of self-revision during peak workload periods and occasional inadequate translations, which sometimes hampered the work of delegations. The importance of continuous training for all translators at all duty stations was emphasized and information was provided by the representative of the Secretariat on the external studies programme at Headquarters. The view was expressed that reliance on night shifts and the inherent risk of lapses in quality were inevitable, but measures could be developed to provide the translators concerned with increased support from submitting offices and secretariats.

8. Concerning the introduction of new technologies, additional information was provided by the representative of the Secretariat on the recent acquisition of computer hardware at Headquarters and its implications. The information provided in the conference room paper on the introduction of computer-assisted translation at Headquarters was noted with interest. It was pointed out that in choosing a system, compatibility and adaptability should be the determining factors. The representative of the Secretariat provided detailed information in this regard. The need for greater coordination between New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, in order to avoid duplication of efforts, was stressed. The deficiencies of the Optical Disk System (ODS) in Vienna were also pointed out. Concern was expressed that safeguards should be in place to protect the investment by the United Nations when extending to contractual translators access to new technologies such as the ODS and computer-assisted translation (CAT) software.

9. Concerning the abolition of posts, which was dealt with in the first part of the Secretary-General's report on interpretation and translation issues (A/53/221), the representative of the Secretariat explained that their impact had been mitigated by temporary assistance and increased outsourcing of translation work. Regarding both interpretation and translation, the Secretariat remained committed to maintaining the parity of the official languages of the Organization and proportionality among languages had been an important factor in deciding where cuts should be made. Remote interpretation (which was currently in the testing phase) and remote translation (which was a well-established method of work) would promote a more efficient use of existing staff capacity at the various duty stations.

10. The view was expressed that a system of managed assignments, based on incentives, was required in order to encourage language staff to accept assignments to duty station where opportunities for advancement were restricted because of small staffing tables.

11. In response to requests for clarification, the representative of the Secretariat provided information on the breakdown by language of the abolished posts and explained that care

had been taken to preserve an appropriate balance between higher-level and entry-level posts. It was pointed out that certain posts, which had previously been left vacant in order to achieve a mandated vacancy rate, were now available for use in the current biennium.

12. Concern was expressed that costs saved by the abolition of posts would be outweighed by the cost of excessive reliance on temporary staff at peak periods, which might be detrimental to quality.

Conclusions and recommendations

13. The Committee on Conferences noted with appreciation the reports on translation-related matters contained in documents A/AC.172/1998/CRP.6 and A/53/211.

14. The Committee noted also with appreciation the efforts made by the Secretariat to address the concerns expressed by delegations on translation-related matters and encouraged the Secretariat to continue its efforts to improve quality and proficiency in all six translation services including, *inter alia*, through continuous training for staff and the introduction of new technology.

15. The Committee noted with appreciation that the backlog of publications awaiting translation had been eliminated now that the moratorium on contractual translation had been lifted.

16. The Committee requested that the budget proposals for conference services for the next biennium should be prepared on the basis of actual anticipated requirements, taking into account both anticipated productivity gains and the need for improvements in the delivery of services as identified in section B of General Assembly resolution 52/214.

17. The Committee welcomed the efforts of the Secretariat to improve access to ODS, particularly the establishment of additional ODS centres.

18. The Committee recommended that due account should be taken of the return in terms of possible savings and efficiency gains in planning new technology.

19. The Committee also recommended that the experience of all duty stations should be taken into consideration in the development of CAT.

20. The Committee recommended further that CAT systems should be compatible with the existing computer platforms used in the United Nations, that they should be upgradeable to future technological developments such as speech recognition and remote access and that the experience of all duty stations should be taken into account in their development.